

The Question of Satire in “Caliban upon Setebos”

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ALMOST one hundred years after Browning published “Caliban upon Setebos” in his 1864 *Dramatis Personae* critics are in as much a muddle over the poem as Caliban is over God. If we disagreed simply over whom or what the poem satirizes, we could be content to let our disagreement continue; after all, the poem would be all the richer for bringing together a range of religious thought and opinions, synthesizing it, and satirizing all or parts of it. The problem, however, is that criticism has not yet established whether the poem is satiric at all, or if it is, whether the satire is of primary or secondary importance. It is time to settle this question of satire.

One line of criticism sees Browning’s portrait of Caliban as largely positive. These critics think of Caliban as a kind of primitive man with a savage mind. They point out that, even before Darwin, scientific evidence had been pointing toward an evolved world. They cite works like Herschel’s *A Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* and Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, both from the 1830s. Then, they say, Darwin had clarified man’s relation to the lower orders of animals, and Browning and his contemporaries at last knew that man had not always been man.

Looking at Caliban’s portrait against this background, the anti-satirists see it as a portrayal of man at one particular stage of his religious development. Caliban’s concept of God is not mature, they agree, but it does represent a natural stage of development not reprehensible in its own time. How could Browning be satirizing what man had to go through, they ask. They remind us that Browning was a just man who believed in a just God, a man who wrote Mrs. FitzGerald that “in the case of any one deprived, by no fault of his own, of those *eyes* of the soul—the reasoning powers—could we wrong the justice as well as the goodness of God more offensively by supposing that He will ignore the consequences of his own act and punish the blind for blindness?”¹ They see Caliban as one so blinded, not through

¹Edward McAleer, ed., *Learned Lady: Letters from Robert Browning to Mrs. Thomas FitzGerald, 1876-1889* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), p. 35.

any fault of his own but through his inevitable place on the evolutionary ladder.

This line of criticism has a long history, from the 1920s to our own time. Early on Watson Kirkconnell saw Caliban as “an undeveloped savage mind ruminating on the nature of God, and, even in his crude way, reaching out after higher conceptions.”² Although C. R. Tracy, a major spokesman for this point of view in the 1930s, found some satire in the poem (aimed at Calvinism), he found Caliban’s portrait largely positive: Caliban is a creature who has within himself “the seeds of a truer faith” and simply shows how “religious faith can begin even far back in the evolutionary scale.”³ Tracy saw it as noble, perhaps, that a primitive man living before revelation could develop a “natural theology” on his own, and he saw anthropomorphism not necessarily evil to Browning, a man who always needed to see God with a human face: “In *Caliban upon Setebos*, then, one must beware of seeing a satirical warning against anthropomorphism” (p. 492).

In later criticism Robert Langbaum saw Caliban learning through his monologue, bursting upon the reader at the end “with a new intensity and largeness that justify him.”⁴ John Howard elicited strong response to his 1963 article picturing Caliban as one who appreciates God to the edge of his ability and whose “gropings, no matter how limited, are good.”⁵ Barbara Melchiori went even further, seeing the poem as Browning’s attempt to apply evolutionary theory to religious development, to discover how thought could “grow and develop in evolved creatures” and how God could evolve.⁶ She found much to support her reading, especially the sexual imagery of the poem. As a final representative of this line, Ian Jack has found that “the whole poem is a brilliant exploration of the primitive mind in its attempts to fathom the unfathomable. . . . The thought is confused and muddy, and it is meant to be so.”⁷

Caliban to these critics, then, is the missing link Browning’s age was looking for, an anthropoid able to conceive of God but without revelation and thus without a mature understanding of Him—but certainly not to be condemned for holding a low slot on the evolutionary scale. To them, “*Caliban upon Setebos*” is investigative, non-judgmental, and non-satiric.

Since these critics rely somewhat on the intellectual background of the period to support their view, it is ironic that the same background undercuts

²“The *Epilogue to Dramatis Personae*,” *MLN*, 41 (1926), 215.

³“*Caliban upon Setebos*,” *SP*, 35 (1938), 489.

⁴*The Poetry of Experience* (New York, 1957), p. 207.

⁵“*Caliban’s Mind*,” *VP*, 1 (1963), 257.

⁶*Browning’s Poetry of Reticence* (New York, 1968), p. 142.

⁷*Browning’s Major Poetry* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 266.

that view. Clearly, evolution did fascinate writers and public alike in the 1860s, and the press referred continually to apes, Africans, Irishmen, and other presumed lower orders. Among the fanciful figures pushed into the speculation were Yahoos and, of course, Caliban. Far from being alone in using the Caliban figure, Browning was simply joining his fellow writers and artists in appropriating it. This stock use of Caliban weakens the argument of the non-satirists because, in fact, the standard use of the figure was for abuse. In the vocabulary of writers and artists of the 1860s, a "Caliban" was an object of ridicule.

Punch provides a useful entry into this context from the point of view of Browning, for he seems to have been reading it even while living in Italy: "See what I have copied out of *Punch*," he wrote to Isa Blagden in 1860.⁸ In *Punch* Caliban joined several other figures, all of which the magazine used to stereotype figures currently in its disfavor. It used Caliban, the Yahoo, the ape, and the black African interchangeably in negative portrayals of contemporaries. Of these figures, *Punch* used Caliban at least four times in the years just preceding publication of the poem. On July 13, 1861, it referred to a particular vestryman whose views it ridiculed as a "Marylebone Mooncalf" (p. 19). Six months later (December 21, 1861) it referred to Irish speakers again being ridiculed as "Mr. O'Rangoutang, Mr. G. O'Rilla, Mr. Fitzcaliban, and other eminent Yahoos" (p. 245). On October 18 of the following year it suggested that the Irish Yahoos, the missing links between gorillas and Africans, were howling for liberties "like so many *Calibans*" (p. 165). And finally a bit later (January 24, 1863) it pictured the American slave as Caliban half-crouching between Abe Lincoln's Prospero and Jeff Davis' Alonso, with the caption reading (slave to Lincoln), "'You beat him 'nough, Massa! Berry little time, I'll *beat him too*.'—Shakspeare. (*Nigger translation*.)" ("Scene From the American 'Tempest,'" p. 35). These allusions are part of the general use of evolution in the magazine to belittle individuals and groups. The overwhelming majority of the figures it used were gorillas and monkeys—at least twenty-nine references from 1860 through 1864—with "Yahoo," "Nigger," and "Caliban" appearing less frequently. But the point is that *Punch* used them all interchangeably as pejoratives labeling individuals and groups as wild and savage; the second and third references above are typical of this mixing. Perry Curtis has described the use in *Punch* and other magazines of all of these figures against the Irish in particular: "During the 1860s . . . Paddy became a simianized Caliban who seemed to belong behind bars. In a biological sense, Paddy had devolved, not evolved, from a primitive peasant to an unruly Caliban, thence

⁸Edward McAleer, ed., *Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden* (Univ. of Texas Press, 1951), p. 64.

to a 'white Negro,' and finally he arrived at the lowest conceivable level of the gorilla and the orangutan."⁹ Though the sense of hierarchy may be too great, the point is clear: in Browning's time, Caliban was a stock figure associated with figures of Africans, apes, and Yahoos and was always used abusively. This context, though certainly associating Caliban with evolution, makes him a figure of satire rather than sympathy.

Nineteenth-century painters and engravers seem to have visualized Caliban in similar apelike ways. Fuseli's painting collected in Boydell and reproduced in nineteenth-century engravings pictured him with heavy brow ridges, sloping forehead, simian ears, and tufts of hair on his upper arms. He is contrasted to a noble Prospero, who commands the center of the painting and separates Caliban from Miranda.

With Caliban being this apelike stock figure, Browning would at least have been confounding his readers' expectations to use the figure sympathetically. Critics who want to see "Caliban upon Setebos," then, as investigative, non-judgmental, and non-satiric have a lot more work to do in explaining how Browning's use of the figure overcomes its pejorative use in the nineteenth century.

The critics on the other side of this critical problem find the poem judgmental and thus satiric. Members of the satiric school relate the poem directly to religious thought in Browning's time. They see a number of ways the poem addresses that thought, all of them judgmental and satiric. They see Caliban representing not primitive man but rather modern man willfully making himself into a neo-primitive, into a kind of religious neo-savage in the nineteenth century. Though stock use of the Caliban figure might support this viewpoint, their argument that the poem is satiric nevertheless frequently fails. It does so when critics fall into what we might call the trap of content. They assume the poem satirizes a particular body of thought rather than a more general way of thinking.

Some critics who have fallen into this trap of content find the poem satirizing secularists; Dallas Kenmare, for example, sees Caliban as an agnostic.¹⁰ Others see the poem satirizing secularized religious thought; Norton Crowell, for instance, attempting to answer Tracy, finds the poem "a satire on all believers in natural theology and on the Darwinians insofar as they postulated the nature of God on the evidences to be found in the rocks" (p. 222). And Michael Timko, attempting to answer Howard, finds satire aimed at the religious thought of natural theologians, particularly the thought of Bishop Butler in his *Analogy of Religion, Natural and*

⁹*Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971), p. 101.

¹⁰*An End to Darkness* (London, 1962), p. 202, in Norton Crowell, *A Reader's Guide to Robert Browning* (Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1972), p. 235.

Revealed and William Paley in his *Natural Theology*. Timko finds those theologians taking utilitarian and hedonistic approaches and sees the poem warning against “the dangers to religious thought from those within.”¹¹ Robert W. Witt and Wendell Harris have recently aided Timko’s argument by linking Caliban’s thought with Plato’s and with a succession of Platonic thinkers ending with Bentham. Witt traces parallels between Caliban’s theology and that of Plato in the *Timaeus*, while Harris finds that “if God’s attributes are to be determined by analogy with man’s unaided experience [as they have been by the Platonic Christians from Augustus and Aquinas to Pope and Paley], Caliban’s logic has at least as much force as that of the necessarily optimistic believers in the Great Chain.”¹² These critics see in Caliban a satire on modern theologians’ willingness to de-evolve, to return to primitive theology developed before or without revelation rather than to accept the progress in man’s theology brought about through revelation. They do best when, like Harris, they see the poem primarily satirizing how natural theology approaches God, satirizing methodology in theology. This school does something less when a critic is content as Philip Drew is merely to point out that the poem satirizes Caliban’s concept, or the *content* of modern theology. Since few readers will find the content of Caliban’s theology very attractive or widespread, it is not helpful to stop after merely saying that the poem forces the reader “to examine afresh his own conception of God and to see how far he is himself guilty of worshipping a deity without love or compassion for his creation.”¹³ The content of Caliban’s theology would tempt so few that it would hardly need satirizing.

A final group of critics who find the poem satiric all fall into this trap of content. They find the poem thrusting not at secularized religious thinking but at one of the orthodoxies of Browning’s age, Calvinism. Tracy alleges this particular satire even in denying the overall satiric intent of the poem, and others have echoed him. Laurence Perrine sees Setebos as Calvinism’s arbitrary God of power “rather than a God of Love *and* Power.”¹⁴ Similarly, Crowell asserts that “the satire upon Setebos becomes satire on the jealous God of wrath and cruelty” pictured in the Old Testament and particularly in Psalm 50, which provides the epigraph for the poem (p. 227). He sees that jealous God in nineteenth-century fundamentalism and Calvinism, whose God visited a kind of amoral election and reprobation upon mankind. The problem with this approach through content is its superficiality. The

¹¹“Browning upon Butler; or, Natural Theology in the English Isle,” *Criticism*, 7 (1965), 143-145.

¹²Witt, “Caliban upon Plato,” *VP*, 13 (1975), 136; Harris, “Browning’s Caliban, Plato’s Cosmogony, and Bentham on Natural Religion,” *SBHC*, 3, ii (1975), 99-100.

¹³*The Poetry of Browning: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1970), p. 152.

¹⁴“Browning’s ‘Caliban upon Setebos’: A Reply,” *VP*, 2 (1964), 125.

question is not whether Setebos is an adequate God. The poem has attracted and intrigued readers for some one hundred twenty years; it has increasingly drawn modern critics to it. The attractiveness of the poem lies in something deeper than its rejection of the content of Calvinistic theology, natural theology, or any theology. The satiric school has not convinced readers that the poem is satiric primarily because such readers find such satire beside the point, yet they find the poem itself engaging.

If the poem is satiric, then, it is so in a very special way. Timko and Harris are on the right track in concentrating on the processes that lead thinkers to untenable ideologies, processes at work in Browning's day and still at work in ours, when the processes produce new content. Early on, Wilde recognized Browning's interest in process rather than content:

He has been called a thinker, and was certainly a man who was always thinking, and always thinking aloud; but it was not thought that fascinated him, but rather the processes by which thought moves. It was the machine he loved, not what the machine makes. The method by which the fool arrives at his folly was as dear to him as the ultimate wisdom of the wise.¹⁵

Browning identifies Caliban's method with the method of the natural theologians, and Timko and Harris have linked the natural theologians with contemporary political economists and even platonists. But the point to emphasize is that it is not what natural theologians and political economists think that concerned Browning. The poem attracts readers because it examines how some thinkers thought in classical Greece, in Victorian England, and even now. If we look closely at "Caliban upon Setebos" we will see how it approaches that kind of thinking, what faults it finds in it, and what alternate thinking the poem compares it to.

Caliban's speculations about Setebos exemplify the process that concerns us. Caliban considers two functions of Setebos, together with his motives for bestirring himself into those functions. His God is a creator and an orderer. He made the sun and moon, the clouds and winds, the earth and that isle, and all living things: "He made all these and more, / Made all we see, and us"¹⁶ He orders his creation whimsically; Caliban sees Setebos plaguing, marring, vexing the world—or, better, vexing Caliban and favoring Prospero. Setebos' motive for both functions, according to Caliban's way of thinking, is self-aggrandizement. His god created a world of warmth in order to experience its warmth vicariously, a world of generation in order to experience generation vicariously:

¹⁵"The Critic as Artist," in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellman (London, 1970), pp. 344-345.

¹⁶*Browning: Poetical Works 1833-1864*, ed. Ian Jack (Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), ll. 55-56. Subsequent references to Browning's poetry are from this edition and will be identified by line number in the text.

He could not, Himself, make a second self
To be His mate; as well have made Himself:

.....
did, in envy, listlessness or sport,
Make what Himself would fain, in a manner, be. (ll. 57-62)

Cold and mateless Setebos, says Caliban, experiences pleasure second hand. His ordering of His universe is just as egoistic; it gives Him a chance to experience His power, to experience His own being. "What consoles but this?" asks Caliban, "That they, unless through Him, do nought at all" (ll. 114-115). Setebos can be content that "He is the One now: only He doth all" (l. 178).

Setebos' imagined Oneness gives away what is actually going on in Caliban's head; Caliban projects a God who reduces everything to his own ego because Caliban himself does just that to his own world. The mind picturing Setebos as an all-consuming One, an all-consuming Ego, and Caliban himself is a thoroughgoing subjectivist. He views all the world of the senses and all the world of spirit as extensions of his own being; he assumes the universe should serve his ends alone. The creatures that Caliban can dominate and the summertime weather that he enjoys are "good" because they do serve his ends. The malevolence Caliban sees in Setebos, on the other hand, represents the larger universe's actual mindlessness of Caliban's ends, Caliban's frustrated recognition that the universe is not completely subject to his ego. Caliban has not just anthropomorphized a god: he has tried to subject the universe to himself and has then assumed that his anthropomorphized god does the same. Setebos' Oneness is Caliban's reduction of the multitude of existence to his own ego, to the Oneness of Self.

It may not push this line of interpretation too far to understand an almost classic paranoia in this egoistic thought. We would not want to do so if Caliban's thinking was simply that of primitive man, but if the critics are right who see Browning's contemporary "neo-savage" theologians and economists in Caliban, it may be enlightening to consider the possibility.

If Caliban's thinking is paranoid, delusions of grandeur should abound in the monologue. They do so, starting with Caliban's assumption that other creatures have no existence separate from his intentions or whims. The delusions grow in his assumption that the entire universe and himself especially exist to complete an otherwise incomplete god: "God needs me." And this delusion dovetails with Caliban's obvious sense of persecution; his god needs him, among other things, as an object of persecution. The two parts of his paranoia appear together in his recollection of a previous tempest that had shaken the isle:

He hath a spite against me, that I know,
Just as He favours Prosper, who knows why?

So it is, all the same, as well I find.
 'Wove wattles half the winter, fenced them firm
 With stone and stake to stop she-tortoises
 Crawling to lay their eggs here: well, one wave,
 Feeling the foot of Him upon its neck,
 Gaped as a snake does, lolled out its large tongue,
 And licked the whole labour flat: so much for spite. (11. 202-210)

Caliban lays it all open: first the deluded grandeur in his own treatment of the tortoise (her needs are beside the point, only his intentions count); then the same delusion seen in terms of persecution, in the assumption that the universe conspired to destroy his own mean wattle fence; and finally the rejection of any possibility of logical causation that would hold him responsible (was his fence like a house on a flood plain or an office on a fault?). This refusal to make connections appears not only in his "who knows why" but also in his inability to see that his fence was an interference in natural processes no doubt centuries old and that its destruction was at least a restoration of the natural order. In Caliban's paranoia, however, order does not exist outside his ego. The only reality is his ego, grand when exercised, both grand and persecuted when thwarted, and always independent of cause, effect, and responsibility. Such would certainly be understandable in a primitive, but would become an object of satire in a supposedly sophisticated but really savage nineteenth-century or twentieth-century human being.

Or if it is too much to see this egoistic thought process as paranoid, we can at least see it as infantile. Caliban cannot conceive of egos other than his own or of intentions other than his own; even Setebos' vexings amount to negations of Caliban's intentions, not independent intentions. Thus limited, he has developed no further than an unsocialized infant. Thomas P. Wolfe's analysis of Caliban's psychology makes a strong case for seeing Caliban as such.¹⁷ His thesis lacks only an appropriate psychological model, which Erikson provides. According to Erikson's model, the infant at the earliest stages has no sense of the Other, but a healthy child develops that sense, beginning in the realization of the Otherness of the mother. Without that sense of Other, Erikson continues, the child will be left with an alienated and incomplete ego:

Affirmation of the described polarity of "I" and "Other" is basic to the human being's ritual and esthetic needs for a pervasive quality which we call the *numinous*: the aura of a hallowed presence. The numinous assures us, ever again, of *separateness transcended* and yet also of *distinctiveness confirmed*, and thus of the very basis of a sense of "I."¹⁸

¹⁷"Browning's Comic Magician: Caliban's Psychology and the Reader's," *SBHC*, 6, ii (1978), 7-24.

¹⁸Erik Erikson, "Elements of a Psychoanalytic Theory of Psychosocial Development," in *The Course of Life: Psychoanalytic Contributions Toward Understanding Personality Development*, ed. Stanley Greenspan and George Pollock (Adelphi, Md.: U. S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1980), I, 29.

Caliban is like an infant whose development has been arrested. His incomplete “sense of I” leads to his all-consuming ego, which functions like an eternal vacuum never filled. His lack of the sense of Other joins the demanding ego to create what we might call a paranoid infanthility.

The poem suggests this state of arrested infanthility in several ways. One way is through Caliban’s inability to use the personal pronoun “I,” an inability much remarked upon. Most critics have seen this inability as appropriate to Caliban’s status as a “primitive.” Yet what it more directly reveals is Erikson’s unformed “sense of I.” Caliban does not use the pronoun well because he has not developed to the stage in which he would have a clear notion of what the pronoun means.

The poem suggests this arrested development further by showing us Caliban playing. Specifically, Caliban plays house:

Himself peeped late, eyed Prosper at his books
 Careless and lofty, lord now of the isle:
 Vexed, ’stitched a book of broad leaves, arrow-shaped,
 Wrote thereon, he knows what, prodigious words;
 Has peeled a wand and called it by a name;
 Weareth at whiles for an enchanter’s robe
 The eyed skin of a supple ocelot;
 And hath an ounce sleeker than youngling mole,
 A four-legged serpent he makes cower and couch,
 Now snarl, now hold its breath and mind his eye,
 And saith she is Miranda and my wife:
 ’Keeps for his Ariel a tall pouch-bill crane

.....
 Also a sea-beast, lumpish, which he snared,

and calls him Caliban (11. 150-166)

The give-away in this play is Miranda as wife rather than daughter. Though Caliban may have all the preceding details in order, he distorts the relationships, the connections. Like an infant he cannot conceive the subtle connecting threads that order the adult’s world, that relate separate beings into a family and then into a state. He cannot understand the notion of fabric, of whole cloth woven of separate yet intricately related threads of different strengths and different colors. He perceives the thread of his own ego and that thread alone—the ego of the unsocialized infant. For him there is nothing of Erikson’s “separateness transcended.”

The problem with thought processes this infantile is that they cut Caliban off from any of the benefits of maturation, especially from the ability to change, to become different. This is not to say that Caliban cannot grow; he can do that in the sense that his power can increase and his ego can more and more effectively subject the experiential world to it. Ernest Renan was to see that possibility in his *Caliban after the Tempest*, in which Caliban leads a revolution to make himself Duke of Milan. But changes in quantity produce no changes in quality. Only changes in quality can make Caliban different, rather than merely more powerful. The healthy, mature mind can see itself

from outside itself; it can continuously form and re-form itself. A mature adult can see possibilities for himself in the lives and words of others; he can see flaws in himself as others might see them, and as a result he can metamorphose: he can "become" rather than just "be" or just burgeon. If Caliban is just an individual, the loss of this possibility would be a personal tragedy; if he represents a whole set of religious and economic leaders, the loss is much more significant. The way we think can make us or break us.

Browning would pretty certainly have understood Caliban's infantile thinking in terms of such loss. His belief in "progressive development" points toward it, and his poetry of celebration repeatedly insists on the great person's power to change. In fact, "Rabbi Ben Ezra" forms a kind of companion piece to "Caliban upon Setebos," published with it in *Dramatis Personae*. The rabbi, another sort of theologian, is perhaps the ultimate in progressive development, not only "unfixed" but prizing even the pain that comes with continuous growth. And he contrasts his continuous change with its static opposite in terms that suggest Caliban: those who, fixed, can only "be" are "Finished and finite clods," the fixed individual no more than "a brute / Whose flesh has soul to suit." The "clod" Caliban has found a "lumpish" sea beast to play his role, and if his whole self-revelation is not that of a brute, then brutes have never been. Caliban's infantile mind denies him an ability that Browning repeatedly celebrates. He may be one of Browning's most static creations.

The poem images Caliban's inability to develop in at least four ways, all of which link that inability to Caliban's infantile thought processes fairly directly. For one thing, Caliban is mateless and childless. He is, of course, driven by sexual desire, as Melchiori has shown in her analysis of the poem and even as Shakespeare had indicated in *The Tempest*. But Caliban's desires do not lead to marriage and parenthood, for functioning successfully in either role would require the sense of otherness that Caliban lacks and would offer the potential to see oneself from without and to change. When we see ourselves through our spouse's eyes, we open to continuous change, and when we see ourselves in our children, we see ourselves transformed and moving into a future forever transforming. The roles of spouse and parent bring the pain of recognition and loss but the paradoxical potential of life forever new. But Caliban fills neither role. This fact perhaps better than any other explains why Browning would choose the Caliban figure rather than that of African, Yahoo, or ape: with the roles of mate and parent open, no matter how primitive the individual might be, he would still have the potential for change, for future metamorphosis. But Caliban, infantile in mind and thus in function, has no such future. His inability to grow is imaged directly in his matelessness.

His thoughts about the future work similarly. In effect there is no future, only repetitions of the present moment until death: "all things will

continue thus, / And we shall have to live in fear of Him / So long as He lives, keeps His strength: no change" (11. 241-243). This concept of the future relates to Caliban's misunderstanding of the family and state; the child's inability to conceive of the adult leaves him picturing adult life as no more than child's life writ large. When the child explains how he will run things when he's "grown up," he inevitably sees his role as essentially unchanged, burgeoned but not different. The infant's lack of any sense of time works similarly. The infant has neither past nor future. Caliban's lack of either reinforces his infantile thought processes and assures his changelessness.

His lack of past and future culminates in his lack of any faith in afterlife:

'Believeth with the life, the pain shall stop.
His dam held different, that after death
He both plagued enemies and feasted friends:
Idly! He doth His worst in this our life,
Giving just respite lest we die through pain,
Saving last pain for worst,—with which, an end. (11. 250-255)

Movement into an afterlife would mean, of course, an ultimate metamorphosis, and whether it comes after repeated reincarnations and gradual movement up through stages of development or as an unmerited gift of grace, it represents a transformation into another level of being. If Caliban cannot conceive of the transformation from childhood into adulthood, certainly he would have to reject his mother's notion of the transformation from life to afterlife. In the infant mind the present simply does not transform at all. Caliban's inability to grow ends in this loss of a vision of afterlife, a vision his mother had presented but he cannot hold.

Some critics, it is good to remember here, have seen Caliban's concept of the Quiet as progressive and evolutionary, as a sign of his being able to become. Tracy saw that possibility early on, and Thomas Blackburn has seen it more recently: Caliban, he writes, "longs for a development in his awareness of God; for the persecutory Setebos to change into 'The Quiet'."¹⁹ If this view were accurate, it would mean that the infant Caliban had some hope of maturing into an adult Caliban. But the evidence of the poem seems to weigh in against the view. The Quiet that Caliban describes is qualitatively no different from either himself or his Setebos. True, as some have pointed out, the Quiet differs from both in feeling "nor joy nor grief." But this difference is only apparent, for Caliban continues, "Since both derive from weakness in some way," and the Quiet is not weak: "all it hath a mind to, doth" (11. 133-137). In other words, the Quiet is different only in being unthwarted; he is not an image of Setebos evolved into a higher form, but an image of Caliban at the peak of power. He is in fact the child's version

¹⁹Robert Browning: *A Study of His Poetry* (London, 1967), p. 160.

of adulthood, the child's image of what it must be like to have no adults to deny, discipline, or punish him. Others like Blackburn have thought of the Quiet as being not so "persecutory," more nearly benevolent, and thus different in substance from either Caliban or Setebos. But, as Crowell has pointed out, if the Quiet is less fearsome to Caliban it is only because he is more remote (p. 223). Those whom Caliban imagines touched by the Quiet are just as "persecuted" as Caliban is by Setebos: "It may look up, work up,—the worse for those / It works on!" (11. 140-141). If Setebos is like the infant's image of his parent, the Quiet might be his image of the cop patrolling the neighborhood or maybe his image of his parent's employer. That person is too removed from the child's life to threaten it, though he does threaten the parent, but that removal creates no essential change. The Quiet is mega-Caliban, not metamorphosized Caliban; he represents growth without change. Caliban's concept of the Quiet reinforces the portrayal of Caliban as fixed through his infantile egoistic thought processes.

At one point Caliban almost grasps metamorphosis, on the brink of conceiving of the Quiet as not only a larger Setebos but also a different one. He imagines that Setebos could grow into the Quiet as grubs grow into butterflies. Such growth could be growth in quality, not just quantity. But even here Caliban's imagination fails him, for the Quiet he has imagined is plainly not qualitatively different from Setebos. As we have seen, Caliban has done little more than he did when he imagined himself as Prospero when he played house. If he could really grow into Prospero, he would be a developing infant, not a man fixed at an infantile stage. But the Prospero he envisioned was still only Caliban; just so, the Setebos presumably growing into the Quiet would still be only Setebos. As Caliban imagines them, Prospero, Setebos, and the Quiet all are only larger versions of himself. The grub metaphor reminds the readers of what every infant ought to do; it fails to tell the infantile Caliban what he has failed to do.

The last and perhaps saddest way the poem images Caliban's failure to develop is through his self-destructiveness. His mind turns to self-destruction naturally; when he imagines Setebos finding him and demanding why he seems happy, he says he would

to appease Him, cut a finger off,
Or of my three kid yearlings burn the best,
Or let the toothsome apples rot on tree,
Or push my tame beast for the orc to taste. (11. 271-274)

And when he finally decides that Setebos has heard him, he responds just this self-destructively:

Fool to gibe at Him!
Lo! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!
'Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip,
Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month
One little mess of whelks, so he may 'scape! (11. 291-295)

Self-destruction, of course, is the natural end of whatever fails to develop; what can grow no more will fade, what is not being born is dying.

As with Caliban's matelessness and his inability to conceive of either future or afterlife, his self-destructiveness relates directly to Erikson's picture of arrested infantility. His unformed, vacuumlike ego swings between expansion and collapse, between making itself all and making itself nothing. This swing is appropriate to the formative stages of early development but not to the mature mind. Erikson describes this as a conflict between "impulsiveness" and "compulsiveness" natural only at a very early stage of development: "alternating between impulsiveness and compulsiveness, the child will try, at times, to act totally independent by altogether identifying with his rebellious impulses or to become, once more, dependent by making the will of others his own compulsion" (p. 44). Self-destruction becomes the end of such movement into dependent compulsion. Caliban makes himself nothing. Being locked in an infantile state means not only a loss of progressive development but a loss even of existence itself.

With Caliban's thought processes this infantile and with Caliban this cut off from progressive development, the question of satire in the poem still remains. Did Browning see the thinking of some of his contemporaries in the thinking of Caliban? Was their thinking similarly infantile? Could the thinking of theologians and political economists have been cutting them off from progressive development? Could Browning have been suggesting that the thinking of Paley and Bentham had produced static men in static systems looking at static worlds, cut off from any opportunity for change and even transformation?

Such a vision of natural religion underlies much of what Harris and Timko have written. In connecting the theology of Butler and Paley with the theology of Plato, Augustine, and Aquinas, Harris shows its static quality, and though the latter remain giants of Christian theology, Harris says that, despite their acceptance of revelation, they give it "insufficient emphasis," leaving them "likely to end in a conception of Deity very like Caliban's Setebos" (p. 103). He is close, but he slips into the trap of content. It is not that each conceives of a deity like Caliban's, rather that each similarly limits himself to what his own ego produces. A paranoid, infantile mind will produce a paranoid theology; an analytic, systematic mind will produce an analytic, systematic theology. The more powerful the theologian is, the more will his concept dominate and thus limit others' theology. Thus the natural theologians are both limited and limiting, snared in the processes of past theology, ensnaring others in their own processes—none of the processes being the one most likely to transform both the individual and his theology, Browning's notion of an intuitional revelation of the God of love.

Here Timko corrects Harris, who had seen "revelation embodied in the New Testament" as the missing element (p. 100). But, again, it is not so

important that Caliban misses the content of the New Testament; it is vital that he misses “revelation” as a way of knowing, what Timko calls “intuitional knowledge” (p. 142). In fact it is “intuitional revelation” that is missing from ego-centered thought processes, and after a brief look at Bentham, we will see why this must be so.

Browning does seem to have been suggesting that contemporary political economists were as trapped in Caliban’s self-centered and self-destructive thought processes as the natural theologians were. Historical evidence seems to say so. For one thing, historians link the natural theologians and the political economists, remarking on the similarity in evangelical and utilitarian thought in Browning’s time. Richard Altick, for instance, agrees with historian G. M. Young in finding evangelical and utilitarian methods of thought to be very much the same; he makes much of the “connection between Paley’s divine science and the dismal one,” of what he sees as the “strange alliance between theology and economics.”²⁰ And modern analysts verify what Browning could have seen in his own day: this shared method of thought seems to have brought the political economists to the same dead end it brought the theologians to. By the time Browning wrote “Caliban upon Setebos” the classical political economy of the Bentham school had weakened and over the next decades would be supplanted because of its inability to evolve an understanding of and solutions to the economic problems of mid-century England. The problem seems to have been that the model could not explain or even accommodate change, even in the hands of Mill. Gareth Stedman Jones sees it thus:

The terrors of the Malthusian and Ricardian “stationary state” were transformed by Mill into a vision of relative comfort. . . . But this rather prosaic forecast was hardly a utopia. Mill’s attitude towards the future was characterized more by resignation than optimism. Progress was seen, not as an infinite Theodicy, but rather as a limited and gradual development towards a finite state.²¹

Though Jones may make Mill less hopeful than he was, it is hard to imagine a vision farther from Browning’s general faith in progressive development, which always looked toward “infinite Theodicy,” never toward the “finite state.”

Modern analysts agree that classical political economy had begun its long decline by mid-century. Jones cites Alfred Marshall and his 1873 *The Future of the Working Classes* as the beginning of the new line in political economy: Marshall wondered “whether progress may not go on steadily if slowly, till the official distinction between working man and gentleman has passed away; till by occupation at least, every man is a gentleman.” For the stationary state Marshall “substituted progress, an incessant evolutionism.”

²⁰*Victorian People and Ideas* (New York, 1973), pp. 126-127.

²¹*Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 2-3.

And the end of that evolution was to be the metamorphosis of man—"a transition from self-interest to self-sacrifice and altruism" (Jones, pp. 5-7).

Was Browning aware of these movements in political economy? Does internal evidence from the poem suggest that he was a step ahead of Alfred Marshall? Though it does not announce it in the title, the poem does seem concerned with political economy in the island. In going over Setebos' motives for creating and then vexing the world, Caliban turns explicitly to the profit motive. In Caliban's description of it, the profit motive is totally ego-centered, lacking any sign of the political economist's cherished "invisible hand." The profit motive is bankrupt:

'Saith, He may like, perchance, what profits Him.
Ay, himself loves what does him good; but why?
'Gets good no otherwise.

.....
Also it pleaseth Setebos to work,
Use all His hands, and exercise much craft,
By no means for the love of what is worked.
'Tasteth, himself, no finer good i' the world

.....
Than trying what to do with wit and strength.

.....
No use at all i' the work, for work's sole sake;
'Shall some day knock it down again: so He.
(ll. 179-199)

Work seems to begin and end in the ego of the worker, and profit is exercise of the ego, little beyond. In such a vision, the cycle of creation and destruction is endless and non-progressive. The profit motive is the ego circling back on itself. The passage certainly portrays a bleak economic system in a very definite "stationary state." It would be simple to add Browning's idea of progressive development to Jones's list of the "important political and intellectual changes of the 1860s" lying behind Marshall's new political economy of transformation (Jones, p. 5).

There is reason to believe, then, that Browning was suggesting that political economists in the Bentham school shared with natural theologians like Paley an ego-centered process of thinking. Stagnation results from the thinking of both. It is not that Paley and Bentham worshipped Setebos but that each was locked into a closed system, unable to develop beyond the bounds of that system. The gulf between Bentham and Marshall, at any rate, was, according to Jones, "the gulf between two distinct systems of thought" (p. 6). Critics like Erdman should perhaps take another look before associating Browning with "the concept of 'natural progress' entertained by the political and biological utilitarians."²² The lack of progress in the system, to which Stedman testifies, would have told Browning that the whole system

²²"Browning's Industrial Nightmare," *PQ*, 36 (1957), 417.

was itself corrupt. The “work” and “profit” imagery in the monologue surely relate Caliban’s theological speculation to the speculation of political economists, to equal disadvantage.

The subtlety in positioning an alternate thought process in the poem is remarkable. That thought process might be called “intuitional revelation.” The poem gives it no name, but it suggests its reality powerfully. Coming to terms with this alternate way of thinking will settle the question of satire in the poem.

If we return to the content of Caliban’s theology, we remember that Setebos was a creator and orderer. As creator, he is specifically called “maker,” Caliban using that word and its variants over twenty times in the poem. Of course, it is not Setebos who has made Caliban but clearly Caliban who is making Setebos. Caliban is the maker not only of Setebos but of a host of other items too, in fact and in fancy. They include clay sculpture, a pipe to make music on, and even a song, in the last lines before the rising storm silences him. We can hardly miss the implication: Caliban is a kind of mock-artist, even a mock-poet. Not maker-poet, but maker/mock-poet. As we have seen, the god he makes fails to have any being outside Caliban’s own ego. So too his artistic creations; Caliban allows nothing he makes to be Other. The clay bird ends being “lessoned he was mine and merely clay,” and if the pipe should assert its independence, Caliban asks, “Would not I smash it with my foot?” Assuredly. The song is one of the circularities of the poem—Caliban’s consecration of himself to the god which is no more than himself, narcissistic self-worship. His art goes nowhere.

Yet this mock-art reminds us of the true art, art that has life independent of the maker’s. A true maker creates the Other. This mock-art might remind us of the true art of Browning himself, with its independent men and women, dramatic personae of many different interests and origins. This mock-art might remind us that Caliban has his true maker in the maker of this poem. The maker of the poem becomes the antithesis of Caliban, the mock-maker of Setebos; the maker of the poem could conceive and make a creature like Caliban, an alien creature who could never move outside himself to create a Browning. We might thus finally see that the way a true artist/poet thinks differs radically from the way a Paley or a Bentham might think and produces radically different results.

The true poet’s way of thinking is as generative as its opposite is circular. The poet creates others and in the act creates himself; as Erikson has seen, since creation of an Other is necessary to generation of an I, the first product of a generated Other is the generated Self. In a way, the created becomes creator, and the child is father of the man. Yet the Other created by the poet is also like a child—of the artist yet not him, translating him into the future and, as Browning’s early model Shelley had written, quickening new births wherever the wind carries it. The poet’s way of thinking thus

produces the kind of progress one might well call “an infinite Theodicy.” When the rabbi, for instance, conceives of God as maker, he sees that potter making his clay figures, men, to serve as “heaven’s consummate cup.”

The poet’s “intuitive revelation” is the way of thinking that leads to true art, true theology, true political economy. “Revelation” suggests an origin outside the thinker and his unrealized ego. It suggests the poet’s ability to negate his ego in the process of realizing the Other. “Intuitive” suggests that revelation speaks not to the mind that processes information through observation and reason but instead to the artist’s whole being. Though not systematic like Coleridge, Browning seems to be describing—only by contrast and thus only by implication—a particularly poetic way of thinking and to be offering it as the life-giving alternative to the rational modes dominating contemporary theology and political economy.

Is the poem, then, finally satire? Some of those who have found it satiric seem to have come close to the subtleties of the poem, but they miss its ultimate subtlety. They have been right in seeing that the poem does not ask approval for Caliban or his theology—or especially the processes that produce it. It does not invite approval of him as a “primitive,” who cannot help thinking as he does. But perhaps they are wrong in seeing the poem as judgmental. Because the poem is the product of poetic thought, Caliban was created by intuitive revelation and thus comes to us with a life of his own. He comes as the maker’s artistic child, a child whom the father would feel sorrow for, whose ways the father might strongly feel were self-destructive, but whom the father cannot judge and condemn. He is the independent Other. To condemn him would be to subject him to his maker’s ego. To condemn him would be to turn poetic thinking into rationalistic thinking and Browning himself into Caliban. Paley and Butler, Bentham and Ricardo cannot be satirized because through his poetry Browning knows them as he knew his son. Those who see no satire in the poem, perhaps, are responding to Browning’s fatherly sympathy. Those who see playfulness may be responding to the father’s love of his son and joy in his being. Those who see the satire may be responding to the father’s regret. The co-existence of these responses has led many like Arnold Shapiro to see the poem as presenting a problem without resolving it.²³ Love and sympathy, pain and regret—here as in his other poems with “villains,” Browning leaves us with them all. He could not satirize what he had created in his maker’s act of intuitive revelation.

²³“Browning’s Psalm of Hate: ‘Caliban upon Setebos,’ Psalm 50, and *The Tempest*,” *PLL*, 8 (1972), 62.